Pain can be defined as an unpleasant sensory or emotional experience that may or may not be associated with tissue damage. One can reasonably assume that what is painful to humans will also be painful to animals. It is generally recognized that all animals, including invertebrates, can feel pain. Pain can have a protective role in that it tends to cause the animal to change its behavior to protect the affected area from further damage and to reduce or avoid recurrence of the painful sensation. Individual responses to pain vary among animals as they do with humans, and can also be species-specific.

Distress is more difficult to define. A guideline from the Institute for Laboratory Animal Research defines distress as stress to which the animals cannot adequately adapt. Distress may be induced by psychological, physiological, or environmental factors. Collectively, these factors are known as stressors. Possible causes of distress include inadequate housing arrangements, over- or under-stimulation, inadequate temperature and humidity conditions, and, of course, pain.

Pain and distress can be thought of in terms of a continuum of emotional and experiential states that may occur in an animal. On the left of the figure below, Comfort represents a state of well-being, where the animal is contented and comfortable. Stressors acting upon the animal in increasing severity cause the animal to progressively become uncomfortable (Discomfort), then stressed (Stress), and finally distressed (Distress). Distress represents the extreme point in this continuum, on the far right. Stressors acting upon the animal may move the animal's experience along this continuum between the extremes of well-being and distress. Depending on the nature and severity of a stressor and on the animal’s current state of being, the animal may adapt successfully to a stress (Adaptive Behaviors) or it may become distressed in a way that threatens its well-being or health (Maladaptive Behaviors). Maladaptive behaviors include abnormal feeding, absence or diminution of grooming, and changes in social interaction (aggression, withdrawal).

Resources

Contact your veterinarian or a local veterinary school or veterinary technology program to get more information about an animal species.